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**The Mediated Gaze**

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**The Mediated Gaze**

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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## **Dedication**

For Anthony Campuzano



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## **Abstract**

### **The Mediated Gaze**

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This report is a compilation of the influences that shape my current work. In this written representation of my process I mimic how ideas overlap and collide, rather than taking a chronological approach to my development over the past three years. The role of ornament to engage contemporary viewing is a dominant theme, in both my work and the report. I approach painting as an attempt to understand contemporary visual culture and how we look at objects today. My paintings rely on ornament as an entrance into exploring aesthetics and my personal history.

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## **The Mediated Gaze**

As an image-maker, I engage with culture through painting. Today, looking is shaped by the speed and quantity of images encountered. In society, images are constantly present from the extensive resources of the Internet, twenty-four hour cable news, traditional advertising, cell phones and digital cameras. The art that I make speaks to the impact of image saturation on the experience of viewing. My approach to making is an embrace, and a call to pause and examine how we see.

In painting, I rely on intensive looking to convey meaning in my work. My interest in aesthetics pulls from the model presented by Johanna Drucker in her lecture “Art Theory Now: From Aesthetics to Aesthesis.” Drucker opens up Adorno's aesthetic theory to allow for art to exist within contemporary society as well as art's admittance of pleasure.<sup>1</sup> The idea of accepting pleasure in contemporary art is surprising, because of the current tendency in certain circles of artists and art intellectuals to place critical discourse ahead of visual sensation. However, it is very much in line with my approach as an artist and a viewer of art. The controversial nature of art's inclusion of pleasure can be compared with the conversation regarding beauty in the nineties and the resulting conversation in the aughts. Pleasure has association with sensation, and in accepting its presence in art, Adorno's idea of art as resistant is shaken. I believe that art, without sacrificing intelligence or critique, can foster a productive dialog with culture. This dialog does not rely on art's status as other. Art as other implies there is a separation from art and contemporary society. I frame my approach by embracing contemporary culture's

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Drucker, “Art Theory Now: From Aesthetics to Aesthesis.”

image saturation, eliminating the notion of art's reliance on a separation from culture to enable criticality. Through current work I claim pleasure as a viable tool in reflecting on visual perception through the use of ornamental motifs.



Figure 1: Gilded Shore, 2011

The application of ornament is a link between art and society. Ornamental motifs are ever-present in life, informing art, fashion, design, and architecture. Embellishment is a mode of conveying meaning and taste within a particular social construct. A historic example is the use of the star motif in many cultures including Islamic Art, Judaism, Victorian England and contemporary pop culture. The star's meaning shifts in relation to each historic context. In my painting *Gilded Shore* (Figure 1) the composition is comprised of star motifs, focusing on the common association of a star to the celestial and to hope. The multiplicity of use and the recycling of motifs throughout history reveal

the malleability of ornament.

I am drawn to art's inherent ability to transform. As an artist, I approach source material with the underlying belief that through the inclusion of an image in art, it is recontextualized, and is inevitably transformed. Choice can dictate meaning in a work, and results in relationships between images and forms that can alter the reading of a piece. Ornament lends itself to transformation. The ornamental motif implies multiple reads depending on its application; a rose may represent many things including nature, love and beauty. In Oleg Grabar's book *The Mediation of Ornament* he proposed the idea "that the transformation of the mimetic sign is important, not the sign itself."<sup>2</sup> Grabar raises this question in his study of Islamic art; however, my current work explores its relevancy in contemporary art. Similar to Grabar's investigation, my work relies on the flexibility of ornament to convey information. In my current work I focus on emphasizing the degrees of transformation. I complicate the meaning of imagery further through abstraction and repetition. My paintings challenge the idea that the decorative is passive, and calls on ornament as agent to inform the emotional tone of the pieces.

My relationship with images has changed over time. In earlier pieces I chose figurative images as seen in *Amulets 1-3* (Figures 2, 3 and 4). The images were sourced from the designer Alexander Girard's archive of amulets and his amulet inspired textiles. In these earlier paintings, my interest was how patterns interact with a re-purposed image. The work led me to focus more closely on the abstract forms that occurred when the amulets were overlapped and when integrated with a grid.

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<sup>2</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 19.

Figure 2: *Amulets 1*, 2009Figure 3: *Amulets 2*, 2009



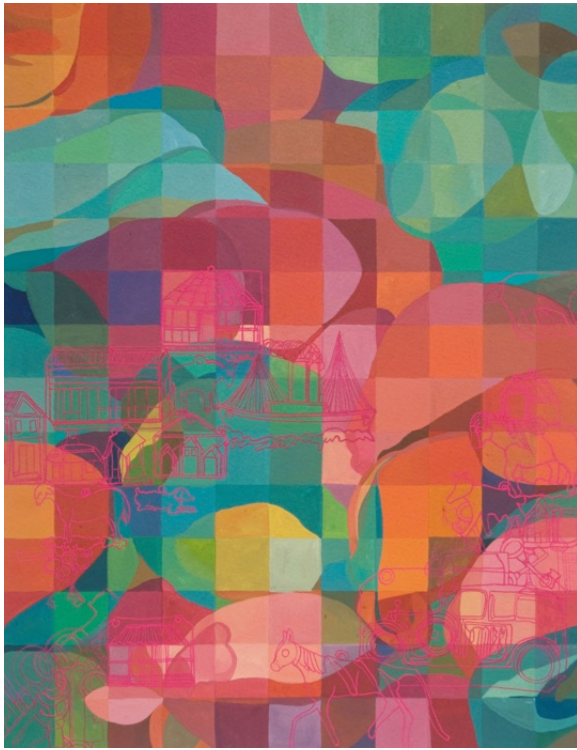


Figure 4: *Amulets 3*, 2009

Alexander Girard as a collector and a designer still interests me, but the specificity of my earlier work brought up questions regarding the clarity of my intent. The work from that series that influences my current pursuit is *Crystal and Flame* (Figure 5). In this work, two paintings from the Girard series hang flush on specially designed digital wallpaper. The size of the forms in the paintings as well as the size of the cellular pattern in the wallpaper competes with one another. The work does not offer an ideal viewing distance. A disruption occurs when both parts are seen together that both repels and entices the viewer. This work's success rests in the interaction of disparate parts to create visual tension.

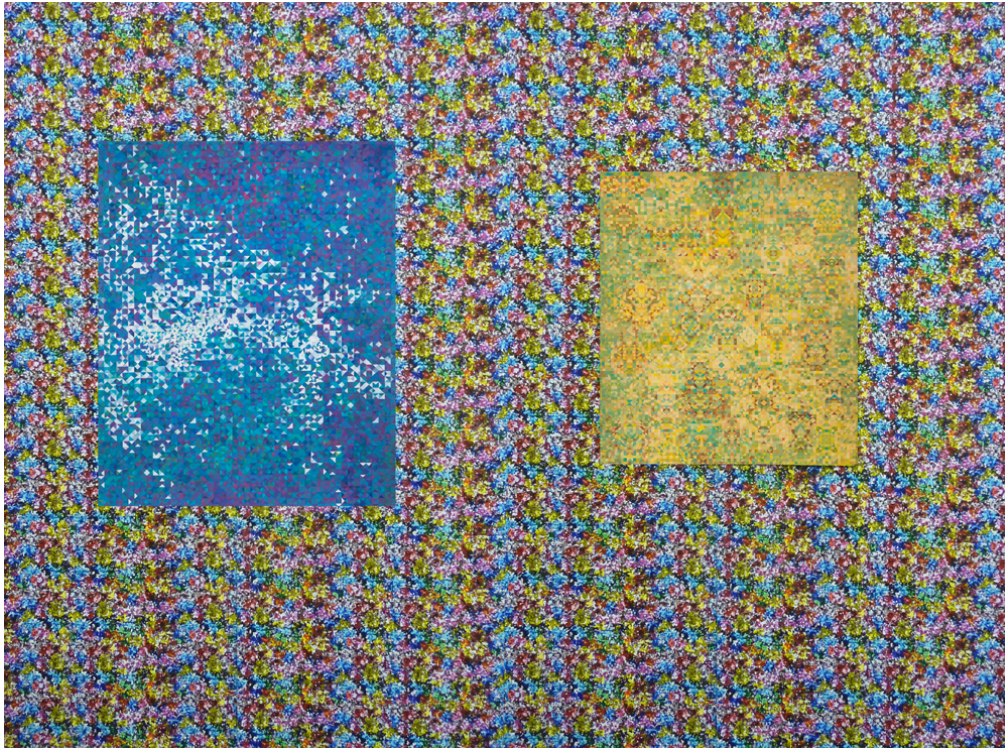


Figure 5: detail of *Crystal and Flame*, 2009

My current approach is informed by how an image can dissolve, rather than the image's reference to specific research. I am no longer interested in announcing through my work my interest in one archive or tradition; rather I want my work to embody historical study and personal reflection using the application of ornament. In the more recent *Apples and Madonna's* (Figure 6), I revisit combining a digital print with a gouache painting. The digital print and painting are mounted on a support with hand painted edges and is more contained than *Crystal and Flame*. In *Apples and Madonna's* the painting is made after the digital print. The palette is consistent throughout the piece. The imagery is pulled from a memory of a location. I intend the piece to produce the visual tension of the two mediums to mimic my experience of this location.

An underlying theme in all of my work is an embrace of Oleg Grabar's assertion that ornament works as an intermediary between the viewer and the concept of a work.<sup>3</sup> This concept, that Ornament as an intermediary or tool, elevates it from its secondary status in art making. No longer a tool for decoration, it is the entrance or avenue for the viewer to engage with the concept of the work.



Figure 6: *Apples and Madonna's*, 2010

I approach Grabar's idea in part through the strategies I employ in the compositional design of my work. I build abstract geometric compositions that combine forms to create varying levels of distortion. I compile the layers in the pieces through the

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<sup>3</sup>Oleg Grabar, *The Meditation of Ornament*.



use of matrices, mixing and careful planning with flexibility to allow for intuitive moves. This is clearly seen in a current piece *Tempered Motifs* (Figure 7), where the building of the image is a completely additive process with the use of the matrices. In the work there is a plan for the final appearance of the piece and the emotional tone I wish to achieve. However, the individual moves to reach the final outcome are based on a responding to the work through the making. I dissolve each images constituent forms which opens up the geometry's potential or primacy, which in turn allows for organic gestures.



Figure 7: *Tempered Motifs*, 2011

The work I have been making since the series that investigated Alexander Girard's archive has been a broader approach to the history of the study of ornament, and how this history can be a tool in the dialog about image saturation. The painting that is a link from the Girard-based work and the more recent works is *Wall to Wall Carpet Soul* (Figure 8). In this piece, figurative elements remain, yet they become overrun by the geometry. In

this painting I draw upon the historical use of ornament in architecture, and use artificial light to establish a constant for the collaged elements to exist within. The artificiality of the light creates an illusion of depth in the composition. The overall geometry and circle pattern disrupts the immediate understanding of this space. Light is a tool with which space is constructed; even the perspective in this work relies on light to achieve depth. *Wall to Wall Carpet Soul* presents the possibility of depth through color but is an example of how ornament can dictate how and when space is perceived.



Figure 8: *Wall to Wall Carpet Soul*, 2010

Architecture has a special relationship with ornament, and this relationship has been a source of intense debate, revolving around the question of what is essential in architecture and moreover is ornament of any sort necessary. I look to the conversation regarding architecture and ornament because there is a connection between how a motif

determines the perception of space both in a building and in a composition. In the Modernist tradition the application of ornamental motifs is often challenged in both painting and architecture. The viewing distance of a painting can be inspired by embellishment's effect on architecture. Owen Jones calls on the importance of embellishment in architecture. In his portfolio *The Grammar of Ornament*, Jones compiles motifs from different cultures. Jones' portfolio presents ornament as a signifier of a period and location. His compilation's intention is to establish a resource of motifs to be used in architecture. The collection he specifies is not to be borrowed from but to be used by the artist as a source in new designs.<sup>4</sup> My work *Owen Jones Remix* (Figure 9) uses Jones' portfolio as a source to compile disparate imagery into a new singular undulating motif, a reference to how the speed of image saturation can result in new combinations.

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<sup>4</sup> Owen Jones, "The Grammar of Ornament."

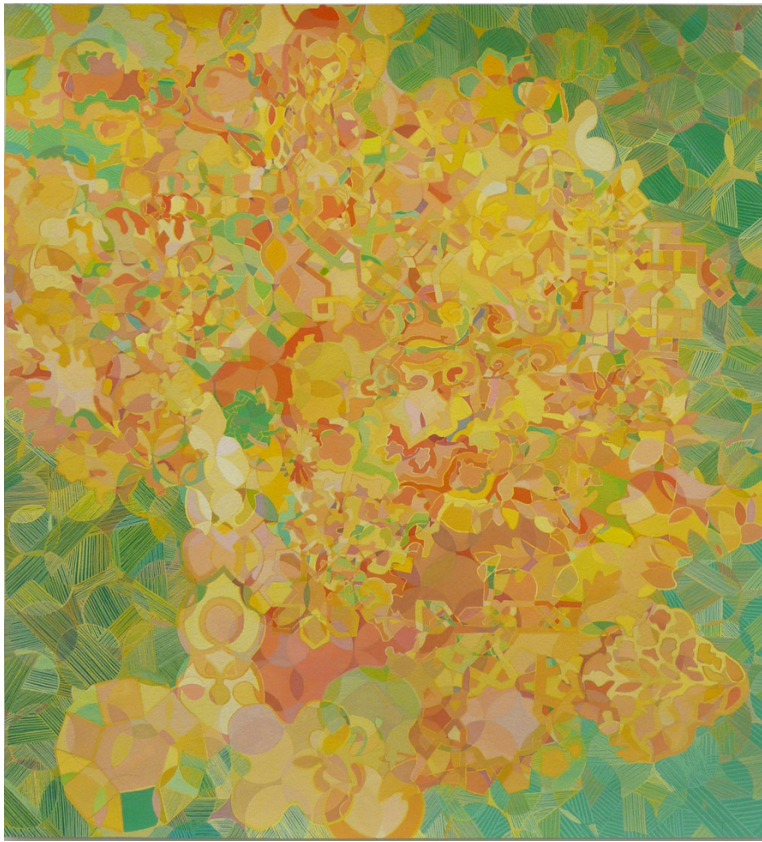


Figure 9: *Owen Jones Remix*, 2011

As an artist I believe color and form can function in a similar way to language. In my paintings images become fractured cells, at times existing as distorted and inflated pixels. A clear example of this is found in the piece *Stray Phrases* (Figure 10) in which I emphasize the connection to the physical movement inherent in reading through the employment of strong horizontal and vertical patterns that repeat. The color is drawn from a set palette and the pixelized color reinforces the disruption of the source imagery. The scale of the cells and the flatness of the work relates to language on the page. Through this approach to image building, my work can negotiate a hierarchy of parts. Reading the paintings is similar to reading a text.



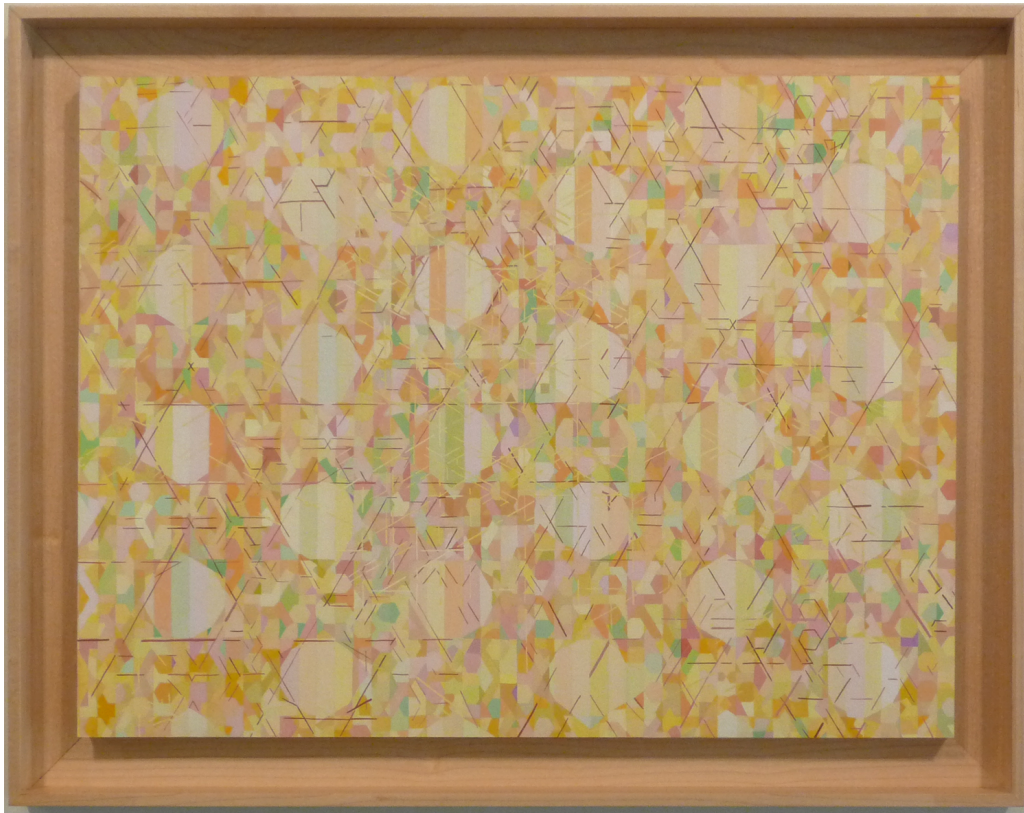


Figure 10: *Stray Phrases*, 2011

The use of color is equal to form in my compositions. I rely on established ideas about color relationships to either soften or emphasize how forms interact. The degree of the transformation of forms is often dictated by color. I use layers of close tolerance color to slow down transitions and to control the speed of how a piece is read.

Along with studying historic forms and theories of ornament, I also work from what would be considered a highly personal and private place in that I often begin a new work by trying to understand a memory or emotion I wish to convey and then investigate how a moment can translate to a broader audience. This past academic year, I read two novels that speak to my approach to making art. The books are Roberto Bolaño's *Antwerp*



and Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*. Both authors approach their narratives abstractly.

*The Museum of Innocence* by Orhan Pamuk is a love story that uses objects to mark the passage of time in the narrative. Pamuk's objects are the physical remnants of an event in his love story. My interest is in Pamuk's use of objects to both illustrate a relationship as well as to connect with a specific period of time in Turkey. My work draws on Pamuk's idea of an object as personal, as well as culturally identifiable and as a marker of time.

In Roberto Bolaño's crime novel *Antwerp* the narrative is composed of a compiling of short glimpses. The narrative is always present but the use of language is what compels the reader forward. In *Antwerp*'s postscript Bolaño writes "Of what is lost, irretrievably lost, all I wish to recover is the daily availability of my writing, lines capable of grasping me by the hair and lifting me up when I'm at the end of my strength."<sup>5</sup> The postscript reveals the intimacy of the author to the text as well as the power of language through phrases. This is also seen in *Atwerp*'s compendious format. In reading *Antwerp*, the specificity of words and how they resonate form the loose structure of the narrative.

My current paintings exist singularly as well as in dialog with one another. Seen together, the works are reinforced by their similarity of approach, differentiated by their individual tone. In some of my most recent pieces, *Negotiated Demons* (Figure 11) and *Filling, Linking and Framing Delectation* (Figure 12), I use framing devices to reinforce the relationship between individual paintings. These specific paintings (Figures 1, 10, 11

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<sup>5</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *Antwerp*, 78.

and 12) are all the same size and mounted on a specially designed maple frame. The common frame and size are intended to emphasize variations in the speed of how individual paintings are intended to be read. As in Bolaño's chapters, each painting conveys a distinct moment with its own voice. This compilation of my paintings does not form a narrative, but becomes interdependent for a larger audience through carefully managed tone and temperament of color based invention, and the overarching concern to elicit an emotional response by consciously directing one away from a clear, decipherable, stable image or closure.



Figure 11: *Negotiated Demons*, 2011



Figure 12: *Filling, Linking and Framing Delectation*, 2011

I make work with an initial intention to use the language of shapes to understand our world. Craft is a value that is important to my approach, through the process of making glimpses of inspiration occur. The material and the craft of painting mold how I shape my ideas. Only through a commitment to the act of making do I understand my paintings. I desire of my paintings a slow read and active participation. The hours spent in the making produce the subtleties I value in the works. My process is tedious and considered. The gestures that arrive in a piece occur only after a great deal of labor painting and intend to reward close looking.

In my paintings time is tied to looking. I strive to manipulate time by slowing down the viewing experience through the scale and complexity of my compositions. In my work ornament and aesthetic theory serve as the basis for my exploration of how forms convey the emotional tone of an experience.

Orhan Pamuk's writing serves as a model to my practice of making art. In his Nobel Lecture, Orhan Pamuk compares the act of writing to the Turkish phrase "digging a well with a needle."<sup>6</sup> Pamuk's lecture speaks to what it means to be a writer, placing an emphasis on dedication and craft. The writer he describes "is a person who shuts himself up in a room, sits down at a table, and alone, turns inward; amid its shadows, he builds a new world with words."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Orhan Pamuk, "My Father's Suitcase."

<sup>7</sup> Orhan Pamuk, "My Father's Suitcase."

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